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PHL 210E.01: Moral Philosophy

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Spring 2012
MW 10:10-11:30
LA 146

Philosophy 210: Moral Philosophy

Humans, when perfected, are the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, the worst of all.

—Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a31-33

Our objective is to develop an appreciation for three leading approaches to moral philosophy through a careful reading of classical texts in the Western tradition together with some of their recent descendants. Our investigation of each approach will center around the following three questions: how do I tell if an action is good or right?; what *makes* an action good or right?; what is supposed to motivate me (or anyone else) to do the good or right thing?

Requirements

This is a seminar-style course, so your regular attendance and thoughtful participation are all-important. Occasional absences will diminish your grade; frequent absences will lead me to ask you to drop the course. Reading the assigned works carefully before you come to class is **essential**. Please always be sure to bring the readings to class with you.

Your final grades will be based on the following percentages:

1. Five Short Papers: 88%

2. Participation: 12%. This portion of your grade takes into account (a) your attendance and the *quality* of your comments in class; (b) the preparedness you show in leading class discussion on at least one occasion; (c) the quality of your workshop comments; (d) other short assignments.

In determining final grades I will take into account the extent to which your work improves over the course of the term.

*Please note: All of the assignments are due according to deadline. As a rule, I won't accept late work or 'make-up' work.

Please note also that you must participate in the workshops in order to receive credit on the papers for which they are designed. No exceptions.

If you have to miss a class or anticipate difficulties in meeting an assignment, talk to me about the situation as soon as you can.

Short Papers

The point of the short papers is to give you a chance to develop a position on a fundamental yet focused topic connected to our readings.

You will be divided into two writing groups: Alto and Bass. With the exception of the first paper, members of one group will receive a mark of "Pass (P)," "Marginal Pass (MP)" or "Unsatisfactory (U)" (with the possibility of a "High Pass" (HP) for truly exceptional work) and members of the other group will receive a traditional letter-grade. Two MPs will equal one U, and each U will reduce your

final letter grade by 1/3 (e.g., from “B+” to “B” or from “B-” to “C+”). Two Ps will raise your final letter by the same amount (as will an HP). Everyone will receive marks of P, MP or U on the first paper. A missed paper assignment reduces your final grade by one full letter and a third (e.g. from ‘B’ to ‘C-’ or from ‘A’ to ‘B+’ or from ‘C+’ to ‘D’). Remember, too, that a *late* paper is a *missed* paper.

Academic Misconduct

You plagiarize when you represent someone else’s work as your own. Plagiarism is a form of theft, specifically, the theft of someone else’s *thoughts* (and sometimes even their words) which you then claim as your own. Plagiarism is a stinking practice and it is prohibited by the University of Montana Student Conduct Code (www.umt.edu/SA/). For the purposes of this course, examples of plagiarism range from the blatant, e.g., handing in work that you did not do (perhaps you bought a paper from the internet or simply borrowed a paper from another student) to the more subtle, e.g., using material—perhaps no more than one idea, or a sentence—from an outside source, such as a book, a website, a published or unpublished paper, without documenting that source. Let me know if you ever have questions about whether something constitutes plagiarism (asking will not bring you under suspicion!). It is also a violation of the Student Conduct Code to hand in work that you already submitted for a previous course. You will *at a minimum* receive an “F” on any work that plagiarizes.

Books

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. Irwin (other translations will work fine for our purposes).

Bentham and Mill, *The Classical Utilitarians*

Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*

Plato, *Republic*

Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*

All of these books are available from the University Bookstore.

Moodle

A number of readings have been posted on Moodle. Please print hard copies to bring to class.

Notes

Please let me know if you have a disability so we can make suitable arrangements.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

This is a rough schedule; we will probably make some changes to it as we go. It’s your responsibility to keep on top of the changes. HO=handout; M=Moodle.

January

M 23 Introductions

W 25 Sedaris, “Tricked” (HO); Plato, *Republic* (Rep.) I 327a-336a (Cephalus and Polemarchus)

Paper #1 due in class

M 30 *Rep.* I 336b-349c (Thrasymachus)

February

W 1 Didion, “On Morality” (M); Cohen, “Judge Judy” (M)

M 6 Foot, “Moral Beliefs” pp. 125-131 (M); NYT, “Race Disparity”; NYT, “”Profiling Report” (M)

W 8 *Rep.* II 357a-367e (Ring of Gyges)

Wilkerson 1-46

Note: Feb. 10 is the last day to add/drop classes with refund

M 13 **Paper #2 due in class; workshop**

W 15 Phillips, “Does it Pay to be Good?” (M)

Wilkerson 47-94

Paper #2 rewrite due Thursday, February 16 by noon in LA 101 (mailbox ‘Clarke’)

- M 20 President's Day: No class
 W 22 Film: "Is this Mississippi?"; Eyes on the Prize, ch. 7 (M)
Wilkerson 95-122
- M 27 Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, chaps. I and IV (pp. 8-22) and "Push-Pin versus Poetry" (p. 94) in *The Classical Utilitarians*; Nozick, "The Experience Machine" (M)
 W 29 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chaps. I-II (pp. 95-115 in *The Classical Utilitarians*)
Wilkerson 123-164

March

- M 5 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chap. III; Singer, "The Singer Solution" (M); Optional: Singer, "What a Billionaire Should Give" (M)
 W 7 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. IV; Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism" (excerpt) (M)
Wilkerson 165-204
- M 12 **Paper #3 due in class; workshop**
 W 14 Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count?" (M)
Paper #3 rewrite due Thursday March 15 by noon in LA 101 (mailbox 'Clarke')
- M 19 Kant, *Groundwork* (G.) Preface and Section I
 W 21 G. section II (406-427)
Wilkerson 205-221
- M 26 G. section II (428-end)
 W 28 **Paper #4 due in class; workshop**
Wilkerson 222-259

April 2-6 Spring Break

April

- M 9 MLK, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (M); Brown v Board of Education (M)
 W 11 Film: "Fighting Back: 1957-1962"
Wilkerson 260-301
Paper #4 rewrite due Thursday April 12 by noon in LA 101 (mailbox 'Clarke')
- M 16 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE] I.1-I.9, skipping I.6 (the *telos* of human life)
 NE 1.13-all of NE II (virtue of character); Comte-Sponville, "Politeness" (M)
 W 18 NE III.6-IV.9 (some particular virtues of character)
Wilkerson 302-331
- M 23 Bennett, "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn" (M); NE 7.1-7.4 (*akrasia*)
 W 25 Lear, *Radical Hope* (excerpt) (M)
Wilkerson 332-363
- M 30 TBA
- May**
 W 2 **Paper #5 due in class; workshop**
Wilkerson 364-412
Paper #5 rewrite due Monday May 7 by 4p in LA 101 (mailbox 'Clarke')

Topics

First Paper Topic

Are there important senses in which the narrator of the story has indeed been 'tricked'? Defend your answer with specifics from the story. 400 words.

→ Due January 25 in class

Second Paper Topic

What point does Glaucon seek to prove with the story of the ring of Gyges? Given this, do you find the story rationally convincing? Explain why or why not. 600 words. Letter-grade: **Alto**.

→ Due February 13 in class. Rewrite due February 16 by noon in LA 101 (mailbox "Clarke")

Third Paper Topic

Critically discuss *either* the charge that utilitarianism is too demanding *or* the charge that it is too permissive. Carefully explain what the charge is and why you do, or do not, take it to be justified. 600 words. Letter-grade: **Bass**.

→ Due March 12 in class. Rewrite due March 15 by noon in LA 101 (mailbox "Clarke")

Fourth Paper Topic

The year is 1850 and I am a slaveowner in the deep South. I treat my slaves well, relatively speaking, and cannot afford to do without them (the economy is predicated on slave labor). Have I violated the categorical imperative? Critically discuss. 600 words. Letter-grade: **Alto**. (It may be helpful to focus on *one* formulation of the categorical imperative.)

→ Due March 28 in class. Rewrite due April 12 by noon in LA 101 (mailbox "Clarke")

Fifth Paper Topic

Aristotle claims that the virtues are the principal component of a good ('eudaimon') life, i.e., that you cannot live well without them. Critically assess this claim through a careful discussion of *one* of the virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Books II-IV only). 600 words. Letter-grade: **Bass**.

→ Due May 7 by 4p in LA 101 (mailbox "Clarke")